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A SONG OF THE GUNS IN FLANDERS

BY

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“THE Song of the Guns” was written under what are probably the most remarkable conditions in which a poem has ever been composed. The author, who is now serving in Flanders, was present at the Battle of Loos and during a lull in the fighting—when the gunners who had been sleepless for five nights were resting like tired dogs under their guns—he jotted down the main theme of the poem. After the battle the Artillery Brigade to which he was attached was ordered to Ypres and it was during the long trench warfare in this district, within sight of the ruined tower of Ypres Cathedral, that the poem was finally completed. The last three verses were written at midnight in Brigade Headquarters with the German shells screaming over into the ruined town.

A Song of the Guns in Flanders

BY GILBERT FRANKAU, R.F.A.

THE VOICE OF THE SLAVES

*We are the slaves of the guns,
Serfs to the dominant things;
Ours are the eyes and the ears,
And the brains of their messagings.*

Ours are the hands that unleash
The blind gods that raven by night,
The lords of the terror at dawn
When the landmarks are blotted from sight
By the thick curdled churning of smoke—
When the lost trenches crumble and spout
Into loud roaring fountains of flame;
Till, their prison walls down, with a shout
And a cheer, ordered line after line,
Black specks on the barrage of gray
That we lift—as they leap—to the clock,
Our infantry storm to the fray.

These are our masters, the slim
Grim muzzles that irk in the pit;
That chafe for the rushing of wheels,
For the teams plunging madly to bit

As the gunners swing down to unkey,
For the trails sweeping half-circle-right,
For the six breech-blocks clashing as one
To a target viewed clear on the sight—
Gray masses the shells search and tear
Into fragments that bunch as they run—
For the hour of the red battle-harvest
The dream of the slaves of the gun!

We have bartered our souls to the guns;
Every fibre of body and brain
Have we trained to them, chained to them.
 Serfs?
Aye! but proud of the weight of our
 chain—
Of our backs that are bowed to their work-
 ings,
To hide them and guard and disguise—
Of our ears that are deafened with service,
 Of hands that are scarred, and of eyes
Grown hawklike with marking their prey—
 Of wings that are slashed as with swords
When we hover, the turn of a blade
 From the death that is sweet to our lords.

*By the ears and the eyes and the brain,
By the limbs and the hands and the wings,
We are slaves to our masters the guns—
But their slaves are the masters of kings!*

Headquarters

A league and a league from the trenches,
 from the traversed maze of the lines—
Where daylong the sniper watches and day-
 long the bullet whines,
And the cratered earth is in travail with
 mines and with countermines—

Here, where haply some woman dreamed
 (are those her roses that bloom
In the garden beyond the windows of my lit-
 tered working-room?),
We have decked the map for our masters as
 a bride is decked for the groom.

Here, on each numbered lettered square—
 cross-road and mound and wire,
Loophole, redoubt and emplacement, are the
 targets their mouths desire;
Gay with purples and browns and blues, have
 we traced them their arcs of fire.

And ever the type-keys clatter; and ever our
 keen wires bring
Word from the watchers a-crouch below,
 word from the watchers a-wing;
And ever we hear the distant growl of our
 hid guns thundering:

Hear it hardly, and turn again to our maps,
where the trench-lines crawl,
Red on the gray and each with a sign for the
ranging shrapnel's fall—
Snakes that our masters shall scotch at dawn,
as is written here on the wall.

For the weeks of our waiting draw to a close
* * * There is scarcely a leaf
astir,
In the garden beyond my windows where the
twilight shadows blurr
The blaze of some woman's roses * * *
"Bombardment orders, sir."

Gun-Teams

Their rugs are sodden, their heads are down,
 their tails are turned to the storm,
Would you know them, you that groomed
 them in the sleek fat days of peace—
When the tiles rang to their pawings in the
 lighted stalls, and warm—
Now the foul clay cakes on britching strap
 and clogs the quick-release?

The blown rain stings, there is never a star,
 the tracks are rivers of slime.
(You must harness-up by guesswork with
 a failing torch for light,
Instep deep in unmade standings, for it's
 active-service time;
And our resting weeks are over, and we
 move the guns to-night.)

The iron tyres slither, the traces sag; their
 blind hooves stumble and slide;
They are war-worn, they are weary, soaked
 with sweat and sopped with rain;
(You must hold them, you must help them,
 swing your lead and centre wide
Where the greasy granite pavé peters out
 to squelching drain.)

There is shrapnel bursting a mile in front on
the road that the guns must take:
(You are nervous, you are thoughtful, you
are shifting in your seat,
As you watch the ragged feathers flicker
orange flame and break)
But the teams are pulling steady down the
battered village street.

You have shod them cold, and their coats are
long, and their bellies gray with the
mud;
They have done with gloss and polish, but
the fighting heart's unbroke;
We, who saw them hobbling after us down
white roads flecked with blood,
Patient, wondering why we left them, till
we lost them in the smoke:

Who have felt them shiver between our
knees, when the shells rain black from
the skies;
When the bursting terrors find us and the
lines stampede as one:
Who have watched the pierced limbs quiver
and the pain in stricken eyes,—
Know the worth of humble servants, fool-
ish—faithful to their guns!

Eyes in the Air

Our guns are a league behind us, our target
a mile below,
And there's never a cloud to blind us from
the haunts of our lurking foe—
Sunk pit whence his shrapnel tore us, sup-
port-trench crest-concealed,
As clear as the charts before us, his ram-
parts lie revealed.
His panicked watchers spy us, a droning
threat in the void,
Their whistling shells outfly us—puff upon
puff, deployed
Across the green beneath us, across the flank-
ing gray,
In fume and fire to sheath us and balk us of
our prey.

Below, beyond, above her,
Their iron web is spun!
Flicked but unsnared we hover,
Edged planes against the sun:
Eyes in the air above his lair,
The hawks that guide the gun!
No word from earth may reach us, save
white against the ground,
The strips outspread to teach us whose ears
are deaf to sound:

But down the winds that sear us, athwart our
engine's shriek,
We send—and know they hear us, the rang-
ing guns we speak.
Our visored eyeballs show us their answering
pennant, broke
Eight thousand feet below us, a whorl of
flame stabbed smoke—
The burst that hangs to guide us, while
numbed gloved fingers tap
From wireless key beside us the circles of
the map.

Line—target—short or over—
Comes, plain as clock hands run,
Word from the birds that hover,
Unblinded, tail to sun—
Word out of air to range them fair,
From hawks that guide the gun!

Your flying shells have failed you, your land-
ward guns are dumb;
Since earth hath naught availed you, these
skies be open! Come,
Where, wild to meet and mate you, flame in
their beaks for breath,
Black doves! the white hawks wait you
on the wind-tossed boughs of death.
These boughs be cold without you, our hearts
are hot for this,

Our wings shall beat about you, our scorching breath shall kiss;
Till, fraught with that we gave you, fulfilled of our desire,
You bank—too late to save you from biting beaks of fire—

Turn sideways from your lover,
Shudder and swerve and run,
Tilt; stagger; and plunge over
Ablaze against the sun,—
Doves dead in air, who climb to dare
The hawks that guide the gun!

Signals

The hot wax drips from the flares
On the scrawled pink forms that litter
The bench where he sits; the glitter
Of stars is framed by the sand-bags atop of
the dug-out stairs.
And the lagging watch hands creep;
And his cloaked mates murmur in sleep—
Forms he can wake with a kick—
And he hears, as he plays with the pressel-
switch, the strapper receiver click
On his ear that listens, listens;
And the candle-flicker glistens
On the rounded brass of the switch-board
where the red wires cluster thick.
Wires from the earth, from the air;
Wires that whisper and chatter
At night, when the trench-rats patter
And nibble among the rations and scuttle
back to their lair;
Wires that are never at rest—
For the linesmen tap them and test,
And ever they tremble with tone:—
And he knows from a hundred signals the
buzzing call of his own,
The breaks and the vibrant stresses,—
The Z, and the G, and the Esses,

That call his hand to the answering key and
his mouth to the microphone.

For always the laid guns fret
On the words that his mouth shall utter,
When rifle and maxim stutter
And the rockets volley to starward from the
spurting parapet;
And always his ear must hark
To the voices out of the dark,—
For the whisper over the wire,
From the bombed and the battered trenches
where the wounded moan in the mire.
For a sign to waken the thunder
Which shatters the night in sunder
With the flash of the leaping muzzles and the
beat of battery-fire.

The Observers

Ere the last light that leaps the night has
hung and shone and died,
While yet the breast-high fog of dawn is
swathed about the plain,
By hedge and track our slaves go back, the
waning stars for guide—
Eyes of our mouths, the mists have cleared,
the guns would speak again!

Faint on the ear that strains to hear, their
orders trickle down
“Degrees—twelve—left of zero line—cor-
rector one three eight—
Three thousand”...Shift our trails and lift
the muzzles that shall drown
The rifle’s idle chatter when our sendings
detonate.

Sending or still, these serve our will; the hid-
den eyes that mark
From gutted farm, from laddered tree that
scans the furrowed slope,
From coigns of slag whose pit-props sag on
burrowed ways and dark,
In open trench where sandbags hold the
steady periscope.

Waking, they know the instant foe, the bullets phutting by,

The blurring lens, the sodden map, the wires that leak or break!

Sleeping, they dream of shells that scream adown a sunless sky—

And the splinters patter round them in their dug-outs as they wake.

Not theirs, the wet glad bayonet, the red and racing hour,

The rush that clears the bombing-post with knife and hand grenade;

Not theirs the zest when, steel to breast, the last survivors cower,—

Yet can ye hold the ground ye won, save these be there to aid?

These, that observe the shells far swerve, these of the quiet voice,

That bids “go on,” repeats the range, corrects for fuse or line...

Though dour the task their masters ask, what room for thought or choice?

This is ours by right of service, heedless gift of youthful eyne!

Careless they give while yet they live; the
dead we tasked too sore
Bear witness we were naught begrimed of
riches or of youth;
Careless they gave, across their grave our
calling salvos roar,
And those we maimed come back to us in
proof our dead speak truth!

Ammunition Column

*I am only a cog in a giant machine, a link of
an endless chain:—*

*And the rounds are drawn, and the rounds
are fired, and the empties return
again;*

*Railroad, lorry and limber, battery, column
and park;*

*To the shelf where the set fuse waits the
breach, from the quay where the shells
embark—*

We have watered and fed, and eaten our
beef; the long dull day drags by,

As I sit here watching our “Archibalds”
strafing an empty sky;

Puff and flash on the far off blue round the
speck one guesses the plane—

Smoke and spark of the gun-machine that is
fed by the endless chain.

I am only a cog in a giant machine, a little
link in the chain,

Waiting a word from the wagon-lines that
the guns are hungry again:—

*Column-wagon to battery-wagon, and bat-
tery-wagon to gun;*

*To the loader kneeling 'twixt trail and wheel
from the shops where the steam lathes
run—*

Theres' a lone mule braying against the line
where the mud cakes fetlock deep!

There's a lone soul humming a hint of a song
in the barn where the drivers sleep;

And I hear the pash of the orderly's horse as
he canters him down the lane—

Another cog in the gun-machine, a link in the
selfsame chain.

I am only a cog in a giant machine, but a
vital link in the chain;

And the Captain has sent from the wagon-line
to fill his wagons again;—

*From wagon-limber to gunpit dump; from
loader's forearm at breach,*

*To the working party that melts away when
the shrapnel bullets screech.*

So the restless section pulls out once more in
column of route from the right,

At the tail of a blood-red afternoon; so the
flux of another night

Bears back the wagons we fill at dawn to the
sleeping column again...

Cog on cog in the gun-machine, link on link
in the chain!

The Voice of the Guns

We are the guns, and your masters? Saw ye
our flashes?

Heard ye the scream of our shells in the night,
and the shuddering crashes?

Saw ye our work by the roadside, the gray
wounded lying,

Moaning to God that He made them—the
maimed and the dying;

Husbands or sons,

Fathers or lovers, we break them! We are
the guns!

We are the guns and ye serve us! Dare ye
grow weary,

Steadfast at night-time at noon-time; or wak-
ing when dawn winds blow dreary,

Over the fields and the flats and the reeds of
the barrier water

To wait on the hour of our choosing, the min-
ute decided for slaughter?

Swift the clock runs;

Yea, to the ultimate second. Stand to your
guns!

We are the guns and we need you! Here in
the timbered

Pits that are screened by the crest and the
copse where at dusk ye unlimbered,

Pits that one found us—and finding, gave life
(Did he flinch from the giving?) ;
Laboured by moonlight when wraith of the
dead brooded yet o'er the living,
Ere, with the sun's
Rising the sorrowful spirit abandoned its
guns.

Who but the guns shall avenge him? Strip
us for action!

Load us and lay to the centremost hair of the
dial-sight's refraction.

Set your quick hands to our levers to compass
the sped soul's assoiling;

Brace your taut limbs to the shock when the
thrust of the barrel recoiling
Deafens and stuns!

Vengeance is ours for our servants: trust
ye the guns!

Least of our bond-slaves or greatest, grudge
ye the burden?

Hard is this service of ours which has only
our service for guerdon:

Grow the limbs lax, and unsteady the hands,
which aforetime we trusted;

Flawed, the clear crystal of sight; and the
clean steel of hardihood rusted?

*Dominant ones.
Are we not trued serfs and proven—true to
our guns?*

*Ye are the guns! Are we worthy! Shall not
these speak for us,
Out of the woods where the torn trees are
slashed with the vain bolts that seek
for us,
Thunder of batteries firing in unison, swish
of shell flighting
Hissing that rushes to silence and breaks to
the thud of slighting;
Death that outruns
Horseman and foot? Are we justified?
Answer, O guns!*

Yea! by your works are ye justified—toil
unrelieved;
Manifold labours, co-ordinate each to the
sending achieved;
Discipline, not of the fact, but the soul, un-
remitting, unfeigned;
Tortures unholy (— — — —) maiming,
known, faced, and disdained;
Courage that shuns
Only foolhardiness; even by these are ye
worthy your guns!

Wherefore—and unto ye only—power hath
been given;
Yea! beyond man, over men, over desolate
cities and riven;
Yea! beyond space, over earth and the seas
and the skies high dominions;
Yea! beyond time, over Hell and the fiends
and the Death-angel's pinions!
Vigilant ones,
Loose them, and shatter, and spare not. We
are the guns.

Flanders.
Winter, 1915.

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